

Labor and Public Employees Committee
Tuesday, March 15, 2022

Senate Bill 419: AN ACT ESTABLISHING A STATE TRAINING ACCOUNT FOR STATE SERVICE CAREER DEVELOPMENT - Support

Senate Bill 420: AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE WORKFORCE AND DISCRIMINATION AND RETALIATION IN THE WORKPLACE - Support

Senate Bill 422: AN ACT CONCERNING THE ESSENTIAL WORKERS COVID-19 ASSISTANCE PROGRAM - Support

Senate Bill 423: AN ACT IMPROVING INDOOR AIR QUALITY IN PUBLIC SCHOOL CLASSROOMS - Support

House Bill 5441: AN ACT ADOPTING THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE TASK FORCE TO STUDY THE STATE WORKFORCE AND RETIRING EMPLOYEES - Support

House Bill 5445: AN ACT CONCERNING STATE STAFFING LEVELS - Support

Senator Kushner, Representative Porter, Senator Sampson, Representative Arora, and members of the Labor and Public Employees Committee:

My name is Travis Woodward, I am a resident of Hamden, and an engineer in the Connecticut Department of Transportation. I am also the president of CSEA SEIU Local 2001, a labor union representing over 23,000 state, municipal, board of education, active and retired, public and private sector workers. I offer the following testimony in support of Senate Bills 419, 420, 422, and 423 and House Bills 5441 and 5445:

Senate Bill 419: AN ACT ESTABLISHING A STATE TRAINING ACCOUNT FOR STATE SERVICE CAREER DEVELOPMENT - Support. I have come before this Committee on multiple occasions to talk about the need for a properly staffed and trained state workforce. SB 419 has the potential to be an important part of achieving that goal by establishing a training fund for state employees that could be used to reimburse workers or pay for things like certifications, training, and conferences. Supporting the career development of state employees will help enhance the quality of services we provide while reducing the state's reliance on costly outside consultants.

Senate Bill 420: AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE WORKFORCE AND DISCRIMINATION AND RETALIATION IN THE WORKPLACE - Support. Discrimination has no place at any worksite. SB 420 will ensure that state managers and supervisors cannot retaliate or discriminate against an employee who alleges discrimination. Imagine going to your manager in good faith, to talk about the discrimination you are facing at work and, instead of being heard and your experience respected, you're retaliated against or told to be quiet. The bill calls for a Racial Justice Ombudsperson who will be responsible for fostering a workplace where managerial authorities are accountable to lead and model antiracist practices, and make changes needed to ensure an antiracist, equitable workplace for all. Our Nation's work towards "a more perfect Union" continues, and SB 420 will provide all state workers with the protections against discriminatory and retaliatory behavior that no one should have to deal with when they are just trying to do their job.

Senate Bill 422: AN ACT CONCERNING THE ESSENTIAL WORKERS COVID-19 ASSISTANCE

PROGRAM - Support. COVID has ripped through our communities leaving so much pain, hurt, and destruction in its wake. While some workers were able to do their jobs from the relative safety of their homes, many did not have that option. Far too many people who were designated essential workers either contracted the virus or had to quarantine. Our laws and support programs were not ready to deal with a pandemic. As a result, workers who were sick or had to quarantine quickly ran out of paid sick days. COVID has taken so much from so many, but SB 422 gives a little back to the brave workers - like paraeducators and school bus workers represented by CSEA - who were there when we needed them. CSEA supports this bill, but we suggest a change in Lines 233-234: Add “or being directed not to report to work by their employer” to the reasons an essential employee can be eligible for COVID-19 sick leave through the fund. As the bill is currently written, other than being diagnosed with or experiencing symptoms of COVID, the other reason for eligibility is being exposed to COVID. If a worker is told by the boss to not come in because someone else was diagnosed with COVID at their worksite, and as a result they did not get paid for the days they did not go in, they should be eligible regardless of whether they were exposed. The key thing is that they missed work and pay because of the virus at the direction of their employer. As a state, we have the responsibility to make whole the essential workers who are still suffering from the impacts of recent surges in cases. While we want to believe that COVID-19 is nearly over, for many the economic destruction caused by the virus is very real and will not be resolved without immediate relief like what is provided in SB 422.

Senate Bill 423: AN ACT IMPROVING INDOOR AIR QUALITY IN PUBLIC SCHOOL CLASSROOMS

- Support. When the coronavirus reached us in March of 2020, it became immediately apparent that our failure to invest in maintaining and improving the ventilation systems in our public buildings would have drastic consequences. Our desire to safely reopen our schools was significantly compromised by our inability to guarantee the necessary air filtration. SB 423 will help our state respond to this challenge by providing our schools with clear guidance regarding acceptable indoor temperatures and air quality, enabling the use of school construction funds to support HVAC system repairs, and by directing the Department of Labor to ensure necessary school HVAC repairs are made in a timely fashion.

House Bill 5441: AN ACT ADOPTING THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE TASK FORCE TO STUDY THE STATE WORKFORCE AND RETIRING EMPLOYEES - Support.

The coming wave of retirements of state employees is certainly a challenge, but we are not powerless when it comes to making sure that Connecticut is ready. HB 5441 is a proactive response to the so-called “Silver Tsunami” that prioritizes planning and data over panic. This bill empowers key stakeholders such as state employees, commissioners, the Comptroller, and policymakers to use data and planning to help make educated decisions when it comes to the large number of retirements expected early this year.

House Bill 5445: AN ACT CONCERNING STATE STAFFING LEVELS - Support.

The recruitment issues we are facing this year are not by accident. Our state has a history of staffing up drastically and then ignoring staffing levels until it is too late. The most famous case of this was in the early 1980's after the Mianis River Bridge collapse in Greenwich. The hiring that followed in the late 1990's is a major contributor to the “Silver Tsunami” we are having this year. Instead of level hiring since the late 1990's, the state workforce has been neglected and slowly starved to the brink. The majority of state employees that left the Department of Transportation since then have been replaced by higher priced private consultants. Now, while the DOT is already understaffed and forced to privatize a large portion of its workforce, over 30% of those hired in the 1990's are eligible to retire causing a severe crisis and loss of knowledge for the DOT. In order to prevent a similar situation in the future, we must move to level staffing over the upcoming years. If the huge let down of no flying cars by 2015 as promised in Back to the Future Part 2 taught us anything, we will still need our highways and bridges long into the future. Passing HB 5445 will go a long way to help invest in that future. State employees do it better, faster and for less.

I would like to thank you for hearing my testimony.

Travis Woodward

President, CSEA SEIU Local 2001